

JOHN OF A
THOUSAND DAYS



And what if he'd lived?

25 years later, 'Promises'
explores the question

*"We may laugh again, but we'll
never be young again."*

— Theodore Sorenson

By Ellis E. Conklin
Herald Examiner staff writer

Twenty-five years ago today, America fell to its knees and wept with inconsolable sadness, with a grief so wincing that it still grinds the heart on this grim anniversary.

Maybe it always will.

On this day, on that sun-dazzled Dallas afternoon, the life was blasted out of John F. Kennedy. The handsome president, the charming young father — the man who took Jackie to Paris was dead.

It is difficult to find any American over the age of 35 who cannot remember with shuddering vividness where they were and what they were doing on that dark Friday when Camelot crashed and our own special brand of brash, witty royalty faded.

It's as if Nov. 22, 1963, will forever serve as a benchmark, a dividing line — separating a time between cocky innocence and heroes, and cynicism, caution and conspiracy, between "American Graffiti" and Watergate.

A blizzard of books and television documentaries and scholarly interpretations has swept the country in recent weeks as the shifting theories of assassination are unearthed and explored anew. Can we, will we, ever be satisfied?

Or, like the flame flickering at Arlington National Cemetery, will the obsession with Kennedy — and his death — burn eternal?

But perhaps the question that most intrigues and fires the engine of speculation is what if John Kennedy had lived? What if

he had survived those bullets that ripped down from the Texas School Book Depository?

A first-time author from Solana Beach named George Bernau spent more than five years trying to answer that quintessential "What if?" and his ravelings are part of a 643-page blockbuster called "Promises to Keep."

"I don't think there's any doubt but that we would be a little better off as individuals," said Bernau during a recent interview.

"We lost an inspiring leader, and each of us was touched in our individual consciences," Bernau added. "When someone like that stands up and makes an enormous difference, and then is killed, there's something in our minds that says, 'Is it all worth it?'"

The story in "Promises to Keep" is a pulsating concoction of politics, romance and conspiracy that sends history through a blender. Anything seems possible.

John Trelawney Cassidy (John Kennedy) survives three bullets, one of them to the brain, and chooses not to run for re-election.

But so saintly is his stature that he is able to engineer his brother Tim Cassidy (Robert Kennedy) onto the ticket with Ransome Gardner (Lyndon Johnson) in 1964.

But Vice President Cassidy slowly separates himself from Gardner's hawkish Vietnam policies, and then dies in a helicopter ambush during a tour of Southeast Asia.

Then, with monumental revisionism, John Cassidy, who has been re-elected to the Senate from Massachusetts, picks up his younger brother's torch and challenges Gardner in the 1968 pri-

maries. Gardner drops from the race after losing to John Cassidy in New Hampshire — and the nomination becomes a seesaw battle between Cassidy and replacement-Vice President Putnam (Hubert Humphrey).

Underlining the political passions is the specter of conspiracy. There were two gunmen in Dallas is Bernau's hypothesis. One is Arthur Strobe (Oswald) and the other is Antonio Lopata, a twisted Cuban. Both have been hired by a Mafia-Cuban-exile group to avenge Cassidy for failing to provide air cover at the Bay of Pigs.

So fascinated was Warner Books by the chilling premise of Kennedy surviving — and later unraveling the conspiracy to assassinate him — that they paid Bernau a \$750,000 advance, the most money ever given to someone's inaugural entry into the publishing world.

The 43-year-old Bernau is a tall, husky man with a somber countenance. With his wife and daughter, he lives in a sprawling redwood home perched on a hill. From stained glass windows, one can look out above the eucalyptus trees and to the sea beyond.

Bernau was 18 when Kennedy was killed, an undergraduate at USC, sitting in an accounting class when the news struck.

"I remember the professor telling us that the president had been shot," Bernau recalled. "I don't think anyone thought it was serious, but then I walked out and saw the flag at half-mast."

"That, I remember, hit me the hardest. You know, we were all brought up in the '50s, and we had lived such safe, secure lives. Something like this was inconceivable — that this kind of

JFK, B-7 ▶



Chris Gulker/Herald Examiner

First-time author George Bernau of Solana Beach has written a huge novel based on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

"He was such a symbolic person. He symbolized some of the best of America. I'm not sure we've had someone of his stature since then."

Author George Bernau



In "Promises to Keep," a character thinly disguised as John F. Kennedy survives an assassination attempt and gets back into politics. A Herald Examiner artist shows, above, what JFK might have looked like today had he lived.

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JFK**► From B-1**

anarchy and violence could be unleashed."

Bernau, a registered Independent who's never been particularly politically involved, stressed that he has been no more obsessed than anyone of his generation about the assassination. Instead, he was haunted by the notion of getting a second chance at life.

Nearly six years ago, Bernau was nearly killed himself by a drunken driver. He was told by the doctors in his emergency room that he wouldn't survive the head injuries.

When he did recover, Bernau decided to no longer practice law. "And so that notion of the second

chance stayed with me, and that every person, like Kennedy said, can make a difference. That stayed with me," Bernau said.

The lure of "Promises to Keep," Bernau explained, is that everyone does have a point of view about how the flood of history may have been altered had Kennedy served a second term.

"He was such a symbolic person," Bernau said. "He symbolized some of the best of America. I'm not sure we've had someone of his stature since then."

And what if Kennedy had lived?

Bernau shook his head and looked out toward the fog-shrouded ocean. "I don't know. I don't know," he said. "There would have been an enormous change in America had he lived. I don't know exactly."